

Frequently Asked Question about the Village District Project of the Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee

Please come to the CPIC's forum on December 13, at 7:00pm, at the Town Office!

Is Harpswell going to change in the next 30 years?

Very few people in Harpswell want our town to change. New residents, fishermen, old timers, artists, summer people, year round people like Harpswell the way it is or perhaps the way it was. As someone said, "We have a treasure here. We don't want to lose it."

Unfortunately, Harpswell will change. Around 32 new houses a year are expected to be built here during the next 30 years; that's 960 more houses by 2041. It could be more if climate encourages people to move north. Harpswell is a very appealing place with its low taxes, shoreland, and fishing community. If we continue on our current path with our current ordinances, the houses will be built largely on one or two-acre lots throughout Harpswell. These could be relatively high-end homes since one or two acres can be expensive. With these lots, there would be little casual contact between neighbors, and any feeling of community would further dissipate. The expense and distance to neighbors could discourage families from settling in Harpswell. Wildlife habitats would diminish even faster. Routes 123 and 24 would be lined with houses instead of trees, making the drive from Harpswell Neck to Cundy's Harbor no different than driving between two towns anywhere else in the United States.

So, yes, Harpswell is going to change. We can just let it happen, or we can help direct the changes in ways that preserve the special character of our town.

Is there any alternative to this scenario?

The Comprehensive Plan and the Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee (CPIC) has an alternative. It is called the Village District Project. The committee has been working on it for a long time with the help of consultants hired by the town. The idea of the plan is simple. In order to protect the rural and community character of Harpswell, the CPIC suggests we concentrate the incoming growth into one or more "village growth districts", plus the town center. This plan would leave the rural areas rural, and also lower the lot sizes, and therefore the cost, in the village growth areas. This would encourage families to move in and community spirit to develop among neighbors.

Where did the Village District Project come from?

The legislature passed the Growth Management Act in 1988 to foster the protection of Maine's rural areas by identifying growth areas (or "village areas") in Maine towns where new building is to be encouraged. The Act seeks to preserve community character and prevent sprawl and its accompanying increased infrastructure costs by encouraging more compact development in chosen locations.

What is the Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee?

This CPIC was appointed by the selectmen after the 1995 Comprehensive Plan was approved at Town Meeting, to implement the Comprehensive Plan. Its function is to put into practice the Future Land Use Plan outlined in the Comprehensive Plan, calling for setting aside enough undeveloped land close to existing built-up areas to accommodate inevitable growth over the coming 30-50 years while maintaining the community character that townspeople indicate they are anxious to preserve.

How were Village Districts selected?

Suitable areas for Village Districts should be near traditional growth areas, but have enough land that is developable. They should have some amenities nearby, such as stores, churches, halls, etc. They should have acceptable soils and enough ground water, and a lack of constraints, such as steep slopes or wetlands. Also, the area should be small enough that people can walk from one end to the other.

What is the Village District? talk about 12 -> 5 -> 1

The CPIC was given 12 suggestions of growth areas by the consultants. The committee then originally chose five areas using the above criteria; South Harpswell (the area around West Harpswell School), West Harpswell (the area around Mitchell Field), Harpswell Center, Cundy's Harbor (area north of Cundy's Harbor), and East Harpswell (area around Oakledge Rd and south). Those five were eventually reduced to one, West Harpswell. We felt that that area came the closest to maximizing all our criteria.

How will the Village District be different?

The biggest difference will be lot size. Much denser development will be permitted in growth areas, with the lot size reduced

from the current two acres to 30,000 square feet (about $\frac{3}{4}$ acre). Smaller setbacks from the road and from the borders of the lot will be permitted. We hope a park or open space will be included. In general, however, there are no restrictions that are stricter than on housing now.

How will the Village District be better than the scenario described in the first paragraph?

The Village District will be better for the property owner because the smaller lot size will allow the owner to sell more lots and houses for any given amount of property. If he had five acres, at a lot size of two acres, he could only sell two lots and two houses. Under the Village District Project he could sell up to seven lots.

The Village District could be better for the buyers because they could get the land a little cheaper. They would have neighbors who might have children. There might be a greater feeling of community. There might be a store or stores to walk to buy milk or products that there is a demand for. There might be a park where their children could play with other children.

The Village District would be better for everyone in Harpswell because the rural areas would be preserved, so it would be a pleasure to walk, bicycle or drive between villages. There would be greater diversity of people in Harpswell. People who work in Harpswell might be able to live in Harpswell. There would be room for wildlife to continue to share our space. It could help our schools. We might be eligible for state and federal grants. We hope that Village District Project will go a long way to keeping Harpswell the treasure that it is.

What does the Village District Project force property owners to do?

Nothing! The Village District Project does not tell owners what to build or not build, nor how large a lot should be. There are no requirements or restrictions other than what is already in the ordinances. Owners will be able to do everything in the Village District that they could outside it. They could still have lots that are 2 acres (or larger). The Village District Project would only increase the possibilities of what the owner could do with the property.

What about water and septic in the Village District?

There are many possibilities. All housing in the Village District will have to meet the same water and septic requirements that are in the current ordinances. Certainly, there are places in Harpswell that are more densely developed than we expect the Village District to be, and we have to solve the water and septic problems there also. On the other hand, there is new technology that makes it possible to put septic tanks in smaller areas. Also, there is the possibility of sharing the “good” spots for septic and water with others in the community.

When will the CPIC work on standards for our rural areas?

Once the Village District is adopted, the CPIC will work with citizens to plan ways to preserve Harpswell’s rural character.